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ADAPTATION OF THE TRIPTYCH
TO CONTEMPORARY USE

A Report of a Creative Project
Presented to
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of the Requirements for the Degree
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Sue Carol Lundberg
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by

Sue Carol Lundberg

Approved by Committee:

John Hiehl
Chairman

Donald Book

Earl T. Casfield
Dean of the Graduate Division

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CHAPTER I

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Because of an interest in the use and decoration of the free standing screen, the writer chose to design, construct and paint a series of three panels which are hinged together to form a triptych. Using contemporary design and contemporary media, the paintings will reflect the religious thoughts and feelings of the writer.

I. JUSTIFICATION OF PROJECT

Although the triptych has existed for many centuries, time demands that changes be made. For this reason, the writer chose to work with acrylic polymer paints in place of oils or tempera and to paint on canvas instead of wood. Changes are made not only in media but also in religious thought. Originally used as altarpieces in the Early Christian Churches, triptychs pictured biblical stories and scenes through the use of symbolism. In the 1900's, the German expressionists exhibited hanging panels in groups of threes that showed their angry reaction to world conditions. The writer chose to represent the human figure, both male and female, since they are the only living creatures who can acknowledge the existence of a God.

II. DEFINITION OF TERMS USED

Byzantine art. As the Christian Church began to flourish in Persia, Egypt, Asia Minor, and Syria, the impersonal mystic influence of the East fused with the Hellenistic ideals of man forming what is known as Byzantine art. This tradition was long-continued, beginning in about the year A.D. 300 and lasting until the eighteenth century.¹

Deesis Cycle. Used in the Russian Byzantine art, the Deesis Cycle refers to those persons who answered the invocation or who were called upon to witness the happenings in Christ's life.

Contemporary. Contemporary is used to refer to art currently being produced; it is art of the time.

Genre. Genre refers to the subject matter of a work of art that is taken from everyday life and realistically presented.

German expressionism. As a reaction against impressionism and cubism, the first expressionist movement came into being in 1885 and lasted until 1900. The movement was marked by dramatic themes, intense color and monumentality

¹Helen Gardner, Art Through the Ages (3rd. ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), p. 249.

of form. In Germany, the second wave of expressionism arose in 1905 and lasted until the First World War. Characteristic of this group was the anguish represented in their paintings. After the war, the so-called New Objectivism group dominated the last phase of expressionism, with its realism and social violence. Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Max Beckmann led the short-lived group. Expressionism was expelled by the Nazis who wanted and needed for political reasons a return to romanticism.¹

Gothic art. Named by the architects of the Renaissance who based their ideals on the low curved architecture of Greece and Rome, the term Gothic art was applied to Northern architecture from the twelfth century to the sixteenth century, or until the style was overtaken by Renaissance ideals. "Gothic" meant barbarism. This period was not barbaric but instead saw the beginning of individualism and intellectualism. Architecture and sculpture flourished and the cathedral emerged as one of the highest achievements of the age. Its architecture was beautifully expressive because of high pointed arches and effective use of light.

¹Carlton Lake and Robert Maillart (ed.) A Dictionary of Modern Painting (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1956), pp. 95-98.

Icon. Icon is an image or portrait used in the Greek Church to represent a sacred person.

Iconography. Iconography is the development of the strict use of pictorial symbols which could be "read" by all Christians. As the Byzantine Church and its art spread eastward, the icon became less realistic and more symbolic.

Iconostasis. Iconostasis is a screen or partition with many tiers of icons, used to separate the sanctuary from the main part of the church in Eastern Christian Churches.

Predella. Predella are the panels connecting the triptych and the altar.

Renaissance art. From about 1400 to 1600 the "Re-birth" started in Italy and spread over the world. Emphasis was on man and his curiosity about himself and his world. Consequently, it was an age of scientific research, invention, and freedom of thought. Because of the great prosperity and expansion, architects, sculptors, and painters were in demand. Gaining importance, early Renaissance painting was still very much like that of the Byzantine world, but painters were becoming involved with the presentation of space and with the presentation of the individual in natural and active positions.

Reredos. The Reredos is the panel behind the altar or attached to the altar. This includes any type of decoration; textile, glass, sculpture, carving, or painting.

Triptych. Triptych is any painted picture, carving, sculpture, or work of art on three panels side by side. Many of the paintings discussed in this report were hinged together, frequently having a center panel and two shutters or wings which could be opened or closed over the fixed central part.

Tympanum. Tympanum is the space over the doorway enclosed by the lintel and arch.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Early in the history of the Christian Church, the reredos took the place of the priest behind the altar. Through the use of decoration behind the altar and on the altar, the original position of the priest was changed to the altar front. This move and use of altar decoration was never canonized, but it has been in use for centuries. Twentieth century architecture places emphasis on simplicity rather than on ornamentation. This simplification has affected altar decoration and the use of the triptych as an altarpiece.¹ However, the history of art, the Church, and the triptych have been so closely related that it seems impossible to separate them.

I. EARLY CHRISTIAN AND BYZANTINE ART

This study of the triptych begins with the use of the icon and the development of iconography in early Christian art. These stylized designs served a dual purpose; not only did they decorate the surface of the aspe and reredos, but

¹Paul M. Laporte, "Altarpiece," Encyclopaedia Britannica (1963 ed.), I, 687-688.

they served as a pictorial language which could be "read" by all Christians.

Although plentiful, the subject matter and the way it was presented was strictly regulated by the church. The Old Testament offered scenes from the Genesis, the kings, and the prophets. The New Testament provided scenes from the childhood, life, and death of Christ: the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Flight into Egypt, the Adoration of Magi, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. The Baptism, the Temptation, the Last Supper, and other scenes from Christ's public life and from the lives of saints were represented; also pictured in iconography were Church festivals: Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter.¹

As the control over the system became stricter, the patterns became more abstract. Early paintings had been Hellenistic or naturalistic, but iconography gradually eliminated naturalism in figures and perspective in both buildings and landscape; therefore, everything was placed on one plane and a gold background used. Manuals were provided describing the placement, composition, and color of each icon making the language universal.²

¹Gardner, op. cit., pp. 254-56.

²Ibid., pp. 264-66.

The Byzantine culture advanced eastward and Greek Catholicism became the state religion in Russia. The iconostasis, which had been used previously, developed into an elaborate screen with as many as five tiers of icons. The most important icons were placed on the bottom tier; however, it was still necessary that the others be "read." Larger than life size, they were difficult to see in the wavering candlelight; consequently, the Russians used brilliant colors, forceful patterns, dynamic lines, and elongated figures creating their own Byzantine style.¹

The triptych was used on small altars for private devotion. Late in the Byzantine era, a typical triptych was painted by the Russians, Procopius Chirin and Nicephorus Savin. The left panel, by Chirin, shows the Virgin standing nearest the center panel, St. Michael next to her, and St. Peter to the outside. Savin's center panel contains the Sabaoth Lord God with Emmanuel the Child, a type of iconography known as parenity. The right panel, also by Savin, is of St. John the Baptist, the Archangel Gabriel, and St. Paul. Together the three panels form the Deesis Cycle, a popular subject in Russian iconography. As in most icon painting, both painters used a gold ground, but the difference in the

¹Ibid., pp. 281-4.

work of the two painters is noticeable. Chirin's flesh tones are pinker, while the colors in the clothing are paler than Savin's. Savin uses gold for highlights with touches of white that are not present in Chirin's work.¹

The icon was not always a painted image. Sculpture in the round had been ignored by the early Christians since it was more closely related to pagan art than were the painted images. Carving in relief was, however, an acceptable form of expression and ivory-carving became popular. Byzantine ivory-carvings assembled in the form of triptychs can be found and the subject matter is similar to that of the painted panels. Early carvings show a naturalism that yielded to Eastern influence. After becoming flat and patterned, the carvings returned to a modified naturalism.²

II. GOTHIC ART

As the Byzantine tradition continued in the East, western civilization was in chaos from about A.D. 500 to 1000. The Romans had built roads and cities, establishing customs and culture throughout Western Europe. Invading

¹Rice T. Talbot, Icon (London: Batchworth Press Limited, n.d.), p. 168.

²Joseph Nantason, "Ivory-Carving," Encyclopaedia Britannica (1963 ed.), XII, 840.

northern barbarians brought an end to Roman law and the beginning of feudalism. The Christian Church was the strongest influence of the medieval period and during the upheaval it continued to increase its spiritual and temporal power.

With the crusades beginning in about the year 1000, Europe found itself in a new era of religious enthusiasm and artistic activity. Helen Gardner makes this notation:

Note that this synchronizes with the second Byzantine Golden Age; and it now seems probable that not only the stimulation but also many of the forms in building, sculpture, and other arts are directly attributable to the East.¹

Church architecture of this time varied greatly. In Northern Italy, the use of the ribbed vault, which had been known to the Romans and to the builders of the Near East, was rediscovered. This discovery was important because it made possible the Gothic style of architecture.²

In France, as elsewhere in the North, the intense enthusiasm held for the Church was manifested in the building of great cathedrals. Gothic architects used the ribbed vaulting, developed pointed arches and flying butteresses to obtain height needed for light and expression in their cathedrals. This type of architecture eliminated wallspace

¹Gardner, op. cit., p. 314.

²Ibid., p. 316.

but allowed stained glass to be used in open areas producing decoration more colorful than the Byzantine mosaics. Sculpture was used to adorn altars, pillars, and portals; the human figure was a favorite subject since emphasis was being placed on the new realization of man.

The structural divisions and spatial relationships of the Western or Royal Portal of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Chartres are so similar to those of a triptych the writer felt they could not be overlooked. The three large wooden doors are flanked by figures of the Kings and Queens of Juda, ancestors of Christ, sculptured in the same stone as the rest of the Cathedral. In order to maintain the feeling of the column, the arms and hands of the elongated figures never project beyond the body contour; also the lines of the drapery are vertical and fluted. The center tympanum depicts Christ as the King of Kings which explains the use of the figures below. On the other two tympani the sculptor used man in various occupations since it was believed that man could prepare himself for redemption through labor and knowledge.¹

As the sculptor gained importance, the ivory-carver was relegated to a position of secondary importance. Since

¹Ibid., pp. 333-344.

statuettes and small shrines were still in demand, triptychs of ivory, dated about A.D. 1000, can be found in the Vatican, the Palazzo Venezia, and the Louvre. The style of carving is severe, imitating the flat figures and the idealized faces of mosaics. By the thirteenth century ivory-carving had become, like sculpture, more naturalistic. Several triptychs of this period show a return to naturalism and also stress the Gothic use of the vertical line.¹

The painted panel existed, but it did not gain importance in the North until the Van Eyck brothers painted the Ghent Altarpiece in 1432. Although Gothic in tradition, the altarpiece and other contemporary works will be discussed with the early work of Renaissance artists.

III. RENAISSANCE ART

The Renaissance, with its greater freedom of thought, was opposed by the Church. The thirteenth century had been the high point of religious enthusiasm and since that time the church had become involved in ritual, politics, and commerce. Facing new skepticism, the Church found reform necessary and the artist found noblemen and wealthy merchants, as well as the church, had become his patrons. Altarpainting, whether it was commissioned by the church or by a

¹Nantason, loc. cit.

wealthy donor, took on greater importance. The pieces became large, multi-paneled, and hinged together, reminding one of the iconostasis.

Thirteenth century Italian painters, like the northern Gothic sculptors, attempted to solve the problems of realistic representation. The solution was more difficult because the painter had to rediscover the modeling and perspective that had been eliminated by Byzantine craftsmen. Cimbuë humanized and softened his figures; while in Siena, the Byzantine stronghold, Duccio used light and shadow sparingly to suggest volume and solidity.

Simone Martini, a follower of Duccio's, painted a triptych, the Annunciation. The exquisitely carved golden frame divides the painting into three panels placing Mary and the angel in the larger center panel and a saint in each of the smaller side panels. The positions of the angel and of Mary show an interest in the use of naturalism. The figures are modeled in their features and clothing, but the strong contrasting colors and gold ground create patterns which are almost abstract. Because of this, Martini's work is considered to be mainly Byzantine in style.¹

¹John Canaday, Earth, Heaven, and Hell Man and Mystery in the Middle Ages (Portfolio B of Metropolitan Seminars in Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1958), p. 19.

Giotto di Bondone, a student of Cimbu'e's, turned to naturalism. His work, based on visual perception, was more realistic than anything seen by any living person of that day.¹ John Canaday states:

Giotto's innovations were so fundamental that they changed the whole direction of painting. It is not even too much to say that Giotto set the direction of painting for the next six hundred years, that is, until our own century.²

The Stefaneschi Triptych, although not the best example of Giotto's innovations, was commissioned by the nephew of Pope Boniface VIII, Cardinal Jacopo Stefaneschi. Originally painted for the high altar of St. Peter's, the work shows Christ enthroned on the center panel. The two side panels represent the Crucifixion of St. Peter and the Decapitation of St. Paul. On the predella panels the Virgin and Child are enthroned and attended by two angels and two saints; on either side stand five full-length figures of the Apostles. Probably the most remarkable thing about this triptych is the naturalistic portrait of the donor kneeling before the throne.³

¹John Canaday, Expressionism (Portfolio 3 of Metropolitan Seminars in Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1958).

²Ibid.

³Maurizio Calvesi, Treasures of the Vatican (Skira, 1962), p. 38.

As the Renaissance progressed in Italy, the painting of the multi-paneled altarpieces was curtailed. Easel painting became popular and the artist's interest was mainly in the presentation of a single panel.¹ In northern Europe, where Gothic architecture left little wallspace for decoration, the use of the triptych and other hinged altarpieces flourished.

During the early fifteenth century, the Flemish brothers, Jan and Hubert van Eyck painted the Ghent Altarpiece. There are two important points about the work. First, Rene Berger attributes the Van Eycks with the first use of oil as a creative force rather than a protection of sculptured pieces.² Secondly, the subject matter, although it is medieval, does not rely on symbolism, but shows that the visible world had a definite fascination for the Van Eycks. The Adoration of the Lamb in the center panel reveals knowledge of space and perspective.

Hubert van Eyck was commissioned to do the work in 1415, but he did not start it until many years later. Upon his death in 1425, many of the panels were left unfinished.

¹Laporte, op. cit., p. 688.

²Rene Berger, Discovery of Painting (New York: Viking Press, 1963), p. 211-212.

Jan, the younger brother, completed the work and it is now difficult to know who painted which panel. It has been said that Hubert was a better painter than Jan; however, Jan van Eyck had the ability to give organization to realistic detail. In reference to Our Lady and Child, W. H. James Weale states, "This triptych, had it been completed, would have been John's masterpiece."¹

A contemporary of Jan van Eyck, Robert Campin's importance has been disputed by scholars who feel some work attributed to him belongs to Rogier Van der Weyden. Campin used realistic details, familiar images and places to tell of holy events.² In the triptych, The Annunciation with Donors and Saint Joseph, the Annunciation takes place for the first time in a genre setting. Campin's work is spiritual by his use of symbolism and association. The vessel of clear water representing Mary's purity is equivalent to the fountain found in the garden scenes of the Annunciation and the seven rays of light entering through one of the windows represents the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as a substitution for the usual dove.³

¹W. H. James Weale, The Van Eycks and Their Art (London: John Lane Company, 1912), p. 39.

²Canaday, op. cit. (Portfolio B), p. 21.

³Ibid. p. 22.

St. Joseph, the carpenter, is shown working at a bench on one of the shutters. His attire is contemporary and outside the open window is a typical fifteenth century street scene. The symbolism of the mousetrap on the window sill and on the worktable can be found in the sermons of St. Augustine who called the cross the devil's mousetrap and the bait the Lord's death.¹

Another triptych, The Portinari Altarpiece by Hugo van der Goes, combines the use of realistic detail with idealism. In the foreground of the central panel, grow various colored flowers to symbolize the coming sorrow of Christ's Crucifixion and death. It is not as necessary to rely upon the symbolism in this painting as it was in Campin's work, for sorrow is apparent in the faces of Mary, the Christ Child, and others that surround them. The three shepherds are clearly three individuals, each with his own emotional reaction to the wonder he sees. Previous to this, the Magi had always been pictured in the Adoration, but the presence of the shepherds seems appropriate since Christ is being humbly adored as the one who will suffer for all and not as the King of Kings.²

¹Ibid., p. 22.

²Ibid., pp. 24-25.

Heironymus Bosch and his fantastic triptychs show an abandonment of the traditional form of religious painting used in the Church. It is the content or subject matter rather than the structure or composition that is so different in his pictures. His use of color, landscape, and detail is like that of his contemporaries.²⁸

Bosch painted hell. His hell was composed of imaginative devils, demons, witches, and beggars; of symbolistic moons, owls, magpies, and toads. It now seems apparent that he drew upon obscure esoteric treatises, Christian iconography, Dutch folklore, and astrological ideas of the fifteenth century. Bosch created demons composed wholly of symbols; broken eggshells, withered branches, skeletons, empty or leaking pitchers, and waterlogged craft.²⁴ He also painted single parts of the human frame of exaggerated size and incorporated in his paintings the "Seven Deadly Sins," anger, lust, pride, avarice, gluttony, envy, and sloth which were considered to be a system of morals at that time. Another interesting fact about Bosch's hell is presented by Von Baldass in his book on Bosch:

¹Ludwig Von Baldass, Hieronimus Bosch (New York: Harry N. Abrams Incorporated, 1960), p. 10.

²Ibid., p. 91.

Hell is not conceived as the future but as the present--underground demons break thru the earth's surface where normal vegetation is mingled with growth of strange, gorgeously colored flowers of evil.¹

Bosch's reputation was international; he was as well-known in Spain and Italy as he was in his native Flanders. His numerous triptychs include; The Temptation of St. Anthony, The Garden of Delight, Retable of St. Julia, Retable of the Hermits, The Last Judgement, The Epiphany, and The Haywain Triptych.² Each of these works suggests that Bosch paid more attention to the subtle overtones of the content of his works than was usual with painters of his day. "It seems reasonable to assume," says Von Baldass, "they result from the philosophical outlook . . . of the artist himself, his personality, temperment and mental make-up."³

Bosch feels people are both foolish and wicked since they indulge in passions without restraint and are easily led into deadly sin. He shows no class distinction, but is critical of all, including the clergy. For the first time

¹Ibid., p. 12.

²F. M. Godfrey, Jerome Bosch (New York; Authentic Publications Incorporated, 1948).

³Von Baldass, op. cit., p. 14.

in art there is mature, incisive, social criticism.

Bosch's pessimism is absolute throughout his paintings since he never shows any type of salvation. Several of the triptychs follow this pattern; the beginning on the left, the present folly in the center, and the tortures of hell on the right. The Haywain or Hay Wagon is an example of this. On the left wing Bosch painted the Garden of Eden with the temptation and fall of Eve. The center panel seems to be taken from an old Flemish proverb that the world is a haystack from which everyone plucks as much as he can and greed is obvious as humanity presses forward from all directions, even from clefts in the rock, to snatch a bit of hay from the wagon. On the right wing, devils and demons delightfully repay the transgressors for exceeding the bounds of the Christian morals.²

"Bosch occupies," says Von Baldass, "an unmistakable position in intellectual development of European Art."³ This can be seen in his freedom of expression and independent treatment of his theme, also in his new feeling for the emotional impact of landscape.

¹Daniel Howard, Hieronimus Bosch (New York: Hyperion Press, Incorporated, 1947), p. 14.

²Von Baldass, op. cit., p. 25.

³Ibid., p. 91.

Hans Memlin's triptych, The Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine painted in the second half of the fifteenth century differs from the austere linealism of the Ghent Altarpiece. The Italian influence shows in the softened line quality of Memlin's work. He still retains the color and enamel-like texture that is typical of Flemish painting, but the use of small details is carefully controlled so that the rhythm created by the detail and the softened figures becomes lyrical in feeling.¹

Symmetry is established by the careful placement of the figures, pillars, and landscape centering around Mary and the Child. These two are flanked by St. John the Baptist, an angel, and St. Catherine receiving the ring from Christ. On the right, St. Barbara sits reading a book, an angel holds a book for Mary, and St. John the Evangelist, stands with his cup of poison. The shutter wings include the Vision of the Apocalypse, and Salome receiving the head of John from the executioner.

The Miraculous Draught of the Fishes by Peter Paul Rubens, shows the Italian influence in his work. The subject matter in this triptych is secondary to Ruben's interest in anatomy. Christ, in the center panel, is surrounded by a

¹Gardner, op. cit., p. 539.

tightly knit group of apostles who shows the backward and forward movement typical of the baroque three dimensional design found in Ruben's painting.¹

Panel painting for altars flourished in Germany as early as the fourteenth century. Altarpieces were formed by the combination of many painted panels and were also used as wings on either side of sculptured pieces.² Many pieces were dismantled, lost, or split and placed in different museums. Many altarpieces by the lesser artists can still be found in their original places on the church altars. Because the artist's name is frequently unknown, he is referred to as the master of the particular town or region in which the work was done.

There has been difficulty in understanding German art because it differs from that of other countries. This can be attributed to the lack of political unity and to the regional diversity of the country. The German did not develop the characteristics of his province as did the Sienese, Florentine, or Venetian painters. It was the German's desire to express his own personality in each painting; thus,

¹F. M. Godfrey, Christ and the Apostles (New York: Studio Publications, 1957).

²Alfred Stange, German Painting XIV-XVI Centuries (New York: The Hyperion Press, 1950), p. 7.

the beginning of expressionism.¹ According to Otto Bach, the tendency towards expressionism, ". . . arises whenever social tensions become so strong that reason cannot resolve them and intuition takes over."² This was the case in Germany prior to the advent of Martin Luther so the artist was neither concerned with representing appearances, nor with beauty existing for its own sake. Stange says:

In short, the beauty of German painting consists in the personal interpretations of subject matter by creative artists; he puts little trust in mere forms but animated them with his own feelings.³

Since there are numerous triptychs with similar subject matter remaining in museums and churches throughout Germany, only those having particular importance in the development of twentieth century expressionism will be discussed.

The Crucifixion, an early triptych, was painted in about 1330 for the altar in Cologne. Characteristics that became important in later expressionism are apparent in

¹Arthur Burkhard, "An Introduction to German Painting," A Catalogue of German Paintings of the Middle Ages and Renaissance in American Collections (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), pp. 3-4.

²Otto Karl Bach, "German Expressionism," German Expressionist Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Morton D. May, A Circulating Exhibition, 1960-1961.

³Stange, loc. cit.

this early work: dark folds in the clothing, dark outline in the figures, and emphasis on strong linear pattern. The Crucifixion fills the center panel with the Nativity and Adoration on the left, and the Assumption and Descent of the Holy Ghost on the right.¹

Hans Multscher, who was also a sculptor, painted the Wurzach Altar in Berlin. His figures were realistic to the point of vulgarity and the unattractive color suggested the violence of the Crucifixion.² Previously the painting of the Crucifixion had been to give inspiration without any consideration to the torture involved, but the Germans placed themselves upon the cross and felt the physical agony and pain.

The Isenheim Altarpiece, by Mathias Grunewald, like the Wurzach Altarpiece, is brutal in the portrayal of the Crucifixion. It is a dead Christ, with tendons stretched and knotted, fingers curled in anguish, feet distorted and twisted, flesh torn and fly-bitten that hangs from the cross. Yet the figure is not an image of horror but one of profound serenity showing the power of the spirit.

Since this piece was painted for a monastery that ministered to victims of leprosy and venereal disease, this

¹Stange, op. cit., p. 36.

²Burkhard, op. cit., p. 11.

presentation of Christ's maimed body, although it is not unusual in its agony, it is unusual in its compassion and probably had special meaning for those who worshipped at the altar.

The eight foot high altarpiece is unique in the way it opens. The Crucifixion is on the closed altar wings. These open, disclosing three panels, like a triptych. The center is the joy of The Incarnation; the left wing is the joy of The Annunciation; the right wing is the supreme joy of The Resurrection. The center panels can be opened again to reveal a sculptured piece.

Grunewald gives color symbolic significance. The morbid greens, grays, and reds of The Crucifixion would not be appropriate to reflect the joys of the innerpanels. Therefore, he uses yellow light, oranges, red, pinks, brilliant blues, greens, and golds to give the three joys a mystical, fairy-garden feeling.¹

The strong linear patterns obvious in Grunewald's work are softened by Durer, Cranach and Holbein in the sixteenth century. These three also subdued color but still retained the vigor so traditional of the North.² Each of these men painted triptychs. Hans Holbein the Elder, shows

¹Canaday, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

²Gardner, op. cit., p. 549.

the Renaissance influence in the ornamental arches painted at the top of two panels which are believed to be the wings of a triptych. The figures painted on the panel are in grisaille or monochromatic grays on a rich blue background.¹ Lucas Cranach the Elder, also painted two panels which are thought to be the remaining shutters of a triptych. On the left is the Beheading of John the Baptist and also a self-portrait of Cranach. Surrounded by groups of figures, he leads a horse and peers out of the picture inquiringly. The right panel, The Martyrdom of St. Catherine, lacks the modeling and richness of color that dominates the left panel.² Another triptych of Cranach's is dedicated to the Saints Catherine, Barbara, Dorothy, and Mary. It shows the Ascension of the Virgin Mary in the top center and the Virgin being crowned by angels in the bottom center, while the saints stand on the two wings. The closed shutters show the Annunciation.³

Albercht Durer's triptych, unlike the religious works of Holbein and Cranach, is the first example of a non-religious triptych the writer was able to find. It is a portrait of

¹Jaroslav Perina, German Painting of the 15th and 16th Centuries (Czechoslovakia: Artia, 1962), p. 35.

²Ibid., p. 41-44.

³Ibid., p. 54.

Oswalt Krell and on the shutters are the coats-of-arms of the Krell Family. Although Durer studied in Italy, he retained much of the native tradition which can be noted in the Krell portrait since it is an expression of the total person, not just the exterior appearance but also shows the inner soul.¹

From the beginning of the seventeenth century to the twentieth century the production of German painting was negligible. Because of the religious wars and the introduction of romanticism, it was not until the middle 1800's that Hans von Marees and his philosophy gave any indication of the coming innovations of the following century. Von Marees' impact on expressionism is so significant that he belongs to the twentieth century.

IV. GERMAN EXPRESSIONISM

Twentieth century German expressionism was the direct descendent of earlier German painting. The use of bold intense color, linealism, and emphasis on subject matter with its transcendental overtones were suited to Northern temperament of this century as well as they were to the sixteenth century.² Once again the strong social tensions which

¹Marcel Brian, German Painting (New York: Universe Books Incorporated, 1959), p. 45.

²Gardner, op. cit., p. 736-7.

gave birth to expressionism four hundred years ago could be seen in the years prior to World War I and World War II.¹

Along with the revival of expressionism came the revival of the triptych. This is not difficult to understand when one realizes how widely the triptych was used by the German painters in previous centuries. Its primary importance had been as an altarpiece, but modern Germans exhibiting their triptychs in galleries used this association to express not only religious anguish, but also sociological, political, and sexual anguishes.

To give an understanding of later developments, particularly in the work of Max Beckmann, it is necessary to include Hans von Marees as a forerunner of German expressionism. In the late 1800's, von Marees worked to translate philosophical ideas into terms of monumental form, rejecting imitative realism and heavyhanded symbolic romanticism of his contemporaries.² He did paint a triptych but little information other than the title, Der Heilige George, Der heilige Martin, Der heilige Hubertus, could be found.

¹Bach, loc. cit.

²John Canaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 436.

John Canaday, in his book, stated:

Contemporary German painters have been happy to find in von Mares a Germanic post-impressionist, the only strong transitional figure between nineteenth-century traditions indigenous to Germanic culture and twentieth-century innovations, including expressionism, which found their major development in Germany.¹

Expressionism flowered in Germany with the formation of the Die Brücke or The Bridge. Van Gogh, Munch, and Ensor, who heralded the coming expressionism, directly influenced this group. Emil Nolde, although older than the others in The Bridge, was drawn to the group because of their use of intense color which was similar to his own. Under their influence he became preoccupied with making his painting a personal and highly emotional statement.²

Early in the 1900's, Nolde started painting a series of twenty-three pictures on biblical and other themes of religious legend. He concluded this series with a triptych, Life of Maria Aegyptiaca, in 1912. The first panel shows her sinful life before her conversion, the second shows the conversion, and the third shows her death. Ugliness, shock, and revulsion are expressed in the painting by violent colors and forms that embrace baseness and grossness. Werner

¹Ibid.

²Ibid., p. 425.

Haftmann, contributing this statement to Nolde, says, "Instinct is ten times what knowledge is."¹ Believing this, Nolde mistrusted intellectual control and surrendered fully to the power of color.

The Life of Maria Aegyptiaca was not the only triptych painted by Nolde, in 1921 he painted the Martyrdom, and later the Entombment which is similar to the Isenheim Altarpiece. This similarity is not accidental; Nolde had great respect for Grunewald and also for Durer. It was Nolde's feeling that the late Gothic age was the first great period in German painting and it was his explicit intent to create the second great period.²

Another member of The Bridge, Erick Heckle painted the triptych, Woman Convalescing. It is not as strongly expressive as his prints nor does it give the suggestion of neurotic apprehension found in the prints.³ Heckle was one of the few artists who remained with the group from its formation in 1905 until it was disbanded on the eve of World War I. This long association was unusual because the ex-

¹Werner Haftmann, Emil Nolde (New York: Harry N. Abrams Incorporated, 1959), p. 24.

²Ibid.

³John Canaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), pp. 427-8.

pressionists were as explosive as their art; therefore, membership in the group was in constant fluctuation. Nolde left the group as early as 1907 and Max Pechstein, who painted the triptych, Bay of Monterosso, was expelled in 1912.

The Bridge was absorbed by Der Blaue Reiter or The Blue Rider; a group who felt subject matter was of little importance. Lyrical, musical composition took the place of the harsh, moody lines of The Bridge until the Die Neue Sachlichkeit or the New Objectivity began during the last years of the war and embraced the post war years. Canaday gives this explanation of its art:

"The New Objectivity" refers more aptly to the political and social apathy, the hopelessness, the acceptance of corruption and misery and degradation as the natural state of things which was characteristic of the later postwar years.¹

Max Beckmann was a contemporary of the three expressionist groups. Although he exhibited with them, he remained independent and through study of the old masters, Cezanne, van Gogh, and von Marees, Beckmann correlated expressionism with traditional art.² The monumentality of form seen in the work of von Maree's is evident in Beckmann's work. "I seek," said Beckmann, "to enclose man, 'monster of such terrifying

¹Canaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 434.

²Bach, loc. cit.

and convulsive vitality,' in a structure of lines and planes."¹
 Since the middle twenties, Beckmann had used black outline
 which gave an additional seriousness to many of his pictures
 and also provided contrast to the light, bright colors used.²

Rather than being a singularly personal expression,
 Beckmann's symbolism is universal, since it is based on social
 observation rather than on neurotic private emotionalism.
 Bernard Meyers interprets Beckmann's use of symbolism this
 way:

Beckmann's reactions to the world we live in were
 neither escapist nor occasional. They were a constant
 and powerful reaction against cruelty, stupidity,
 and tyranny, sometimes poetic in mood, sometimes
 brutal, always filled with psychological meaning and
 form.³

In 1938, Beckmann lectured to a London audience on
 his theory of painting. The following statements taken
 from that lecture explain what Beckmann wanted to do in his
 work and also give insight to the use of symbolism used in
 his painting:

I would like to emphasize that I have never been
 politically active in any way; I have only tried to
 present my view of the world as plainly as possible.

¹Ibid., p. 436.

²Bernard S. Meyers, The German Expressionists A
 Generation in Revolt (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1956),
 p. 303.

³Ibid., p. 294.

Painting is a difficult business. It demands the whole of a person, body and soul--and so I have blindly passed by many things that belong to the real and political life. I take it, however, that there are two worlds; the spiritual world, and the world of political reality. Both are manifestations of life, but though they sometimes overlap, they are basically very different. I must leave it to you to decide which of the two is more important.¹

To further explain his work he said:

My constant aim is to capture the magic of the so-called reality, and translate this reality into painting--to make the invisible visible through reality.²

Between 1932 and 1935, Beckmann worked on his great triptych, Departure. About this time the Nazis had gained control of Germany and had branded expressionism as being degenerate. Beckmann and his friends suffered mental anguish. Emil Nolde's paintings were confiscated and he was forbidden to paint, while Ernst Kirchner, mentally unstable because of the First World War, committed suicide when he heard that some six hundred of his works had been condemned by Hitler. For these political reasons, Beckmann hid the triptych in an attic and attached the titleplate, Scenes from Shakespheard's Tempest, to the work. Later Beckmann escaped with his wife and child to the Netherlands and finally made his home in the United States until his death in 1951.

¹Hans Konrad Roethel, Modern German Painting (New York: Reynal and Company, n.d.), p. 83.

²Ibid., p. 73.

Departure, the first of seven triptychs done by Beckmann, portrays his departure from his homeland and the reasons for it. The left panel is dominated by the Nazi torturer with three broken, maimed figures. On the right, the madness and despair of the era is found in the strangely dressed drum beater, representing a propagandist, and in the mad woman tied to the dead form of a man. She holds a lamp and looks away from the uniformed and blindfolded figure on her right with its modern sex symbol, the fish.

Emerging into the deep space of the center panel, there is a release from the agony and constriction of the side panels. As he leaves his land, the dignified king, accompanied by a woman and child symbolize the future and the deep, cool limitless blue space is symbolic of the freedom wanted by the artist.¹

Beckmann's triptychs of the war years spent in the Netherlands had little political or military significance, but he did produce a number of panels that reflected the times. During the forties, his triptychs become more of a highly philosophical commentary on life in general.

One of these triptychs, The Actors, shows a king sacrificing himself for his people in the center panel.

¹Meyers, op. cit., pp. 303-304.

Faith is welcomed by the pious woman on the left and rejected by a surly soldier in the same panel, while seated in front of them is a young man learning his lines. At the right, a young actress studies herself searchingly in a mirror. The triptych represents the rehearsal of a play, hence, the title.¹

The last of the great triptychs has been called Beckmann's most important.² Blindman's Buff yields a prophecy of the future to a youth, the blindfolded figure in the right panel, who searches for his destiny. The youth is given a choice when Beckmann contrasts the drummer playing war rhythms with the peaceful notes of the shepherd, and the lust of a masked figure with the sweetness of a girl playing a harp. The young man is placed in a cabaret, where ignored, he is left to seek his own future. The key to the composition can be found in a previous quotation taken from the 1938 lecture:

. . . I take it, however, that there are two worlds: the spiritual world, and the world of political reality. Both are manifestations of life, but though they sometimes overlap they are basically very different. I must leave it to you to decide which of the two is more important.³

¹Ibid., p. 306.

²Ibid.

³Roethel, loc. cit.

Beckmann's fame came with the realization that his art if it was to be acceptable to others had to express more than just his personal emotional experience. This did not curtail his use of the symbol but intensified his work to make the symbol universal and widen the expressionist boundaries.¹ His greatness is implied in the statement by Bernard Meyers, " . . . we are once more impressed by the imaginativeness of symbolic thinking that puts him [Beckmann] in a class apart from most masters of modern painting."²

¹Canaday, John, Mainstreams of Modern Art (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 438.

²Meyers, loc. cit.

CHAPTER III

EXECUTION OF THE PROJECT

In developing this project, the triptych's historical reference, the association with the altar, and the specific use of the number three had a psychological impact too great to be overlooked. However, the traditional usage and subject matter, having a basis in Catholicism seemed inappropriate for the writer's expression as did the extreme use of symbolism found in Bechmann's triptychs. The contemporary adaptation required an inspection of the writer's religious views.

I. THE DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

Only Man has the capacity to recognize the existence of a God. This recognition comes from a realization of his insufficiency and has manifested itself in the establishment of religion. Various religious rituals have been inaugurated, but each man's response is his own, based on what he knows, what he believes, and his spiritual needs.

To define this, the writer chose to represent the human figure on each of the panels. Various kneeling positions were chosen since it was felt they were representative

of the acknowledgement of God. Each position is different, yet each is similar. The same is true of the colors used and of the movements suggested in the panels. Although similarities are necessary for the unification of composition, they are also meant to give emphasis to the theme of Man's individuality within conformity.

The careful placement of the hands and background colors was intended to suggest the arch traditionally used at the top of the panels. The colors chosen were variations of symbolic color; the blue violets, violets, and red violets in the background replace traditional deep blues and purples, while the earth tones; ochre, umber, and sienna replace flesh tones and emphasize the solidity of the figures. Through the use of dark line and patterns of light, it was intended to give the composition a lyrical quality.

Since the writer felt these ideas could best be conveyed by using large panels and large figures, it was decided to present the subject matter on a free standing screen approximately six feet high and eight feet long. This screen would consist of three panels of equal size assembled in the form of a triptych. Also, it was felt that this adaptation, since it could be considered an architectural element, was more closely related to the

combined architectural aspects of the Gothic altarpiece and the Greek iconostasis than were the hanging panels of the German expressionists.

II. THE CONSTRUCTION

To keep the project light in weight, easy to handle, and yet maintain stability, it was decided to construct two frames for each panel and suspend the canvas between them. This eliminated using two thicknesses of canvas, and the necessity of reframing each panel after the painting was completed.

First the canvas was purchased and prepared. Since it was a lightweight cotton duck and was known to have a high percentage of shrinkage, each piece was cut several inches larger than needed and sized before it was placed on the frames. Several coats of latex paint and a final coat of gesso were used as sizing to obtain the ground and the necessary opacity since both sides of the canvas were to be used.

The six frames were constructed of clear pine: one and three-eighths inches by three-fourths inches. The completed frames were to be sixty-nine inches high and thirty-three inches wide which would make the combined panels eight feet three inches long. After purchasing the wood,

the pieces were cut to their proper dimensions and each end cut at a forty-five degree angle so they would form a mitered corner when the frames were completed. A groove was cut on the inside edge of the pieces so the canvas could be placed in the frames without causing a gap between the outside of the panels.

The next step involved constructing each frame individually. Four corner clamps were used to hold the frame together while the holes for nails were drilled through the ends of the corners and the nails driven in place. After the corners had been secured, the canvas was stretched and stapled to the inside groove. Casein glue was run along the edge of the canvas to help hold it in place and along the inside of the frame. The second frame was placed on top of the first and nailed in place hiding the raw canvas edges. The nails were set and the holes filled with a wood filler.

Figure 1 shows the panels after all the construction had been completed. The next step undertaken was the sketching and painting of the panels.

The finishing of the wooden frames was done after the writer had completed the paintings. Then the frames were sanded, a colored stain added, and waxed. To hold the three panels together small hinges with removable pins were used. Holes were drilled, hinges placed in position, and screws



Figure 1. Panels after the construction was completed.

tightened which completed the construction of the triptych.

III. THE PAINTING

After constructing the panels, black and white sketches of the figures were made. Using a soft pencil on newsprint, the drawings were developed in threes and always drawn to scale. As soon as the kneeling positions and background movement had been established in black and white, sketches using the colors previously discussed were painted with dry pigment suspended in acrylic polymer emulsion. This was the same pigment that was eventually used on the panels.

Before transferring the drawings to the panels, a strip of masking tape to protect the frame was placed along its edge next to the canvas. To eliminate the difficulties in transferring the small sketch to the large panels, it was necessary to make visual divisions of the canvas corresponding to those made on the sketch. Small pieces of black tape were placed on the frame's edge so lines would not need to be drawn on the canvas.

For drawing on the canvas, conte crayon was found to be the most satisfactory. It did not smear as readily as charcoal nor did it mix with the medium producing dirty color. Drawing with a brush and the medium was ruled out since the polymer dries too quickly to allow changes to be

made. As with the sketching, the drawings on the panels were developed in threes.

For the painting, acrylic polymer emulsion medium, which has no color of its own, was mixed with dry pigments. The medium, a plastic product, had amazing versatility; it can be transparent, opaque, or used as a wash since it is water soluble. It can have either a matte or glossy finish and commercial products can be added to give it a texture or make an impasto. Unsurpassed for fast easy handling and durability, it can be applied to any surface.

The dry pigments used as coloring matter are secured from earth, mineral, vegetable matter, or made synthetically. They are purchased in a powdered form and mixed with a vehicle by the artist. The polymer medium used served as a binder holding the pigments to the canvas and reduced the dry pigments to a liquid state so they could be applied with a brush to the canvas. The following pigments were used in this project: cadmium yellow medium, Mars yellow, yellow ochre, cadmium orange, cadmium red medium, alizarin crimson, Indian red, burnt umber, burnt sienna, Prussian blue, cobalt blue, ultramarine blue, viridian, terra verde, and Mars black. In Figure 2, the dry pigment and polymer medium are shown as they are being mixed while Figure 3 is the artist's worktable, materials, and equipment.



Figure 2. Artist mixing dry pigments and polymer medium.



Figure 3. Artist's worktable, materials and equipment.

Large flat brushes were required because of the size of the canvas and the boldness desired. A soft one and one-half inch oxhair brush was used for most of the work, also used were a three-fourths inch watercolor brush, a one-fourth inch lettering brush, and a one inch bristle brush. Since the paint was fast drying, it was necessary to wash the brushes in soap and water immediately after use.

In the preliminary painting, small amounts of the dry pigment were mixed with larger amounts of the medium and applied to the canvas. This was done for two reasons. With this type of paint it is impossible to place a light color over a dark tone because of the transparency of the lighter color. Opacity is obtained by using more pigment which also means the color is more intense. Secondly, the medium formed a glaze over the gesso and made the canvas less absorbent allowing more freedom and flexibility in the following brush work.

Figure 4 and Figure 5 show the panels with the preliminary painting completed. The small sketches can be seen in the corners of the panels, and the black tape on the frames indicate the divisions made by the artist to facilitate the transfer of the sketches. The female figures in Figure 4 form the inside of the triptych and the male forms in Figure 5 compose the outside of the triptych.



Figure 4. Inside panels with preliminary sketching and painting completed.



Figure 5. Outside panels with preliminary sketching and painting completed.

The traditional purpose of the shutters has been to accompany the center panel. With this in mind, the artist arranged the figures and suggested movement in the shutter wings to emphasize the center panels. The female figures on the inside wings pull to the outside of their respective panels. The position of the raised arms, with the outside arm placed higher than the inside arm, and the vigorous brush stroke in the background develop the downward movement necessary for entering the center panel. The figure in the center suggests stability. She rests firmly on both knees, raises her arms and pulls herself erect.

The male figures on the outside shutters also serve the traditional purpose of emphasizing the center panel, but the composition is quite different since the outside wings fold away from the center panel. Once again the center figure provides the necessary stability; he rests on his knees in an attitude of humility while the figure on the right wing leans toward the center figure with one arm raised and turned toward the center panel. The figure on the left wing pulls to the outside of the panel but the raised arm creates the suggested movement necessary to visually enter the center panel.

The artist felt the differences in the roles played by man and woman in society are great enough that the

religious response should reflect these differences. Therefore, the male figure, on the outside of the triptych, are placed in positions that are more conservative than are the lyrical positions of the female figures on the inside panels. This difference is also noticeable in the bolder colors used in the male figures and in the background colors which are not as red as those on the inside panels.

The dark outline used by Beckmann to add contrast to his colors and seriousness to his paintings impressed this artist. Consequently, dark line was used in the project, not as outline, but to emphasize movement, suggest form, and provide contrast to color.

To complete the panels, many more hours of mixing pigments and medium, applying paint to the canvas, re-drawing, sizing out areas, repainting, and washing brushes were involved. After the frames were finished and hinged together, the triptych was complete. Figure 6 and Figure 7, on page forty-nine, show the inside panels and the outside panels of the completed triptych on exhibit.



Figure 6. Inside panels of the completed triptych on exhibit.



Figure 7. Outside panels of the completed triptych on exhibit.

IV. SUMMARY

Using contemporary design and media, this adaptation of the triptych was presented as a free standing screen and the subject matter was suited to the writer's religious views. Until the twentieth century the triptych had been used as an altarpiece, but with new emphasis on simplicity in architecture many altars were left unadorned.

Because of the psychological impact of the triptych, the design philosophy of this project is based on the individual's capacity for accepting and needing a God. In each of the six paintings, the human figure is found in different kneeling positions; colors, although similar, vary and the dark line is consistent throughout the panels.

The artist feels that the boldness of the painting is suited to the large size of the free standing screen and lends emphasis to the solidity and positioning of the figures. It was also felt that the use of the free standing screen, an architectural element, was more closely related to the architectural implications of the traditional triptych than were the hanging panels done by the twentieth century German expressionists.

Examples of the triptych and its usage can be found throughout history. As the early Christians established a new religion, they broke away from naturalism in art because

it was so closely related to paganism. As the Christian culture merged with that of the Near East, the Byzantine style was created. Icon painting or the presentation of images important to the Church had become abstract or stylized and was closely regulated by the Church making it a universal language.

Iconostasis or tiered screens of icons were used behind the altar to separate the nave from the sanctuary and triptychs were used on smaller altars for private devotion. The subject matter and presentation of the triptych was also governed by iconography. Triptychs of carved ivory can be found and these are more naturalistic in style than the painted panels.

While Byzantine art flourished in the East, Northern Europe found itself with more vigor and religious enthusiasm than it had had for many centuries. Spires of Gothic cathedrals rose majestically in the newly founded towns and cities. This type of architecture left little wallspace for decoration; however, stained glass and sculpture were used effectively for ornamentation.

At the same time as Gothic architecture was being developed in the North, the early Renaissance painters in Italy were beginning to break away from the Byzantine style and experiment with the use of modeling and perspective.

Triptychs used on altars in the Roman Catholic Church began to show this return to naturalism, but as the Renaissance continued, painters found they had patrons other than the Church and interest grew in the presentation of the single panel.

In Northern Europe, emphasis was still on the Church. Its lack of wallspace made the use of the painted altarpiece practical. In Flanders, the Van Eyck brothers painted the Ghent Altarpiece replacing tempera with oil painting as a creative force rather than a protection. As early as 1330, painted triptychs were widely used in Germany. Social tensions were great and the German painter found an outlet for his emotions by painting the traditional subject matter in an expressionistic manner. Consequently, the Christ and the Crucifixion, painted in so many altarpieces, show the personal agony of the artist.

Prior to World War I, the German painter, because of social tensions, again turned to expressionism and the use of the triptych was revived. Since churches did not commonly use altarpieces, the expressionist exhibited his panels. The association of the altarpiece with good and evil was capitalized upon by such artists as Nolde and Beckmann.

As the research of the triptych progressed, the artist found the presentation of this project being influenced by

the triptych's religious significance and the technical aspects of Beckmann's work. Preliminary drawings were carefully worked out, while the three panels were being constructed. Two wood frames were needed for each panel and the pre-sized canvas was suspended between them. The painting was done with a combination of acrylic polymer emulsion medium and dry pigments applied with large brushes to obtain the desired boldness. The wooden frames were finished and hinged together, completing the triptych.

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